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Phenomenon Of Social Identification: The Fundamental Problems

Kim L.M. - , Muhitdenova A.M. - , Kamaldinova A.A. - , Khalikova Shakhnaza

Department of Political Science Kazakh National University named after Al-Farabi

Abstract

Identification with other people is one of the most important mechanisms of the socialization process and formation of a person. In a traditional primitive society a group status of an individual was clear and straightforward: you are a part of a class, community, caste etc., in which there exist specific and quite rigid criteria of membership and behavioral norms. However, it is during the period of changes, when the obsolete way of life is tumbling down and a person is losing his or her habitual life benchmarks, when spiritual values that have been solid so far are being destroyed, and the question of personal identity becomes very important. This very fact makes the individual aspire to identify him or herself with one or another community, social structure, and a group, in order to obtain the accustomed sense of security and safety.

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It is known that social identification is the process of psychological self-identification with identity of another person or a group of people. This is a rather complex mental mechanism. In the process of socialization and an individual's entry into the system of social relations, not only the perception of one's "ego" (self-image) is being formed but also that of the "similarity" and unity with other people, with that social environment in which an individual lives and acts. The issue of social identification is becoming of particular importance, since it's inextricably connected with the question of social solidarity, integration and consolidation of society, etc.

In the modern dynamically developing world, which is so unstable and full of contradictions, a human is struggling to find answers to day-to-day questions of own objective reality, trying to predict future in a hope to find a reasonable solution to vital problems and acting against all odds. However, it is not always possible for everybody to do this independently, and then a person, having lost self-confidence, looks for some external assistance, being in need in something or somebody, turns to the common sense or religion or science. But sometimes, in absence of a way out of the existing situation and having lost any hope to change anything, people follow a certain drastic course of action (e.g. commit suicide)

Corresponding Author: Kim L.M
E-mail: kimlm@gmail.com

The process of identification is directly linked to basic needs of each person – self-preservation, self-affirmation, self-expression, and self-defense. Also, prosperity, way of thinking, breadth of knowledge, beliefs and many other aspects have an important role in the process of identification. Identification is not only adaptation to the environment but also a person's reasoned choice which is made in concordance with the own system of values, therefore people have different possibilities to choose their own identity type/

As it has been mentioned above on a few occasions, a person is formed by social relations which the person establishes in the course of life activities. A person becomes an individual only in the society. "Its motives, aspirations, mindset, habits, likes and dislikes depend on its objective attitude to production, exchange and consumption, what civil rights it possesses, how it is involved into political and ideological life of the society etc." [1, p. 63].

The wider and more diverse are the specific forms and types of social relations which an individual is engaged in the process of his life activity, the more versatile and diverse his personality is. Dynamics and diversity of social interactions and interrelations with the necessity require certain order and finding out what interrelations are major and which ones are minor. Besides, an increasing number of types of activities the individual is engaged in, and consequently, his social relations eventually lead to concentration around major and fundamental relations in life of the individual.

The question of what social groups the individual perceives as his "own" and which social groups are familiar or hostile to him becomes critical for self-determination of the individual in the modern world. If the individual identifies him with a particular political or a religious movement, then he fully engages into such movements' principles and directly obeys those principles considering them as mandatory moral rules and a code of conduct.

It is important to note that the "we" feeling is formed in the process of identification within any social group"; there is a perception of "us" vs. "them", a person positively identifies himself with his own group and negatively identifies himself with another (hostile) group, understands group objectives and has same concerns. If, however, the individual has no identification with the others (complete indifference) or ambivalent identification (partial) or there is evidence of the so-called negative identification (rejection of others), this is likely to result in aggression, hostility and anger aimed at a specific object. Accordingly identification is also a special mechanism of formation of aggressive people. Let us only recollect the peculiar "ethics of hatred" towards class enemies proclaimed by the Bolsheviks. Revolutionary fanatics viciously divided the world into "ours" and "theirs" and were fighting with the latter armed with every available method of violence.

Let us consider the major general and theoretical aspects of the above-mentioned problem. From the psychoanalysis perspective, the most important thing for the individual is to defend his "ego", which determines the aspiration to the identification. According to the interactionist theory identification with the immediate environment dominates over the others. Behaviorism views identification as the difference between life strategies of individuals existing under conditions varying from each other. Cognitivism and phenomenology interpret ways of social identity categorization at the level of indirect interpersonal interactions. Sociological approach, in particular the anomie theory, analyzes the status of social disintegration and the loss of usual solidarities in the ever-changing society. Marxism asserts priority of social and economic relations over all others, that is, recognizes the leading role of inequality in wealth over ideological and political sphere. Dispositional theory is important for understanding predictions of the individual's behaviour in a group or a community. The list of approaches to the issue of social identification can be extended. It is obvious that for a profound theoretical understanding of this problem one needs to use a pluralistic approach and take into account all opinions, concepts, and points of view existing in the academic literature.

There is no universal concept of social identification mechanism, yet. This is explained by a great number of social identification theories, which emphasizes interdisciplinarity nature of this phenomenon.

A human being, as soon as he is born, actively enters, "dives" into the system of social connections and relations, special "social fields", in other words, lives in several social dimensions. Certainly, his identification with the immediate social network (family, friends, colleagues) comes to forefront, however, there are many other social networks beyond the immediate one where the individual has to find to establish himself, find a certain place and

have own status.

Identification is becoming a mechanism of defence and helps a person “survive” in jungles of the contemporary society. In psychology, there are three types of defence identification. They are briefly described below [see. 2].

1) Positive. An individual worships and respects somebody and aspires to become like this somebody who evokes adoration and thrill. For example, worshipping a religious or political leader. The type allows bringing together a sufficient number of people into one community or organization using their attitude and fanatic fidelity towards the leader for mercenary purposes. A subordinate wishes to be like his idol and use at least a portion of those privileges that the latter has, like power, authority, income.

2) Negative, opposite to the positive. A person identifies himself with an aggressor, i.e. with the object who induces fear, envy and other negative emotions. Many social relations in the society are unequal. For instance, the relations between a supervisor and a subordinate at work are always formed on the basis of a higher status, accordingly, on more power and a possibility to punish and use penalties, etc.

A subordinate is forced to adapt to a situation in case he lacks a possibility to leave. This is where the negative identification, as the mechanism of defence, comes in. There is an interesting example of this form in the political sphere, and this is a phenomenon of “opposition through imitation” (G. Tarde, sociologist XIX c.). There are examples of such identification in modern politics. For example, if a supervisor is a rough and rational Machiavellian, opposition leaders can fight him by using “his own weapon”. Attitude towards prisoners of war may take a form of the negative identification as has been observed during military actions.

In the given context it is interesting to observe substitution of objects of aggression as a result of the identification, when identification with the aggressor leads to negative energy aimed not towards the aggressor but his other victims. This is exactly what the psychology of betrayal is based on. Think of police goons during World War II, their behaviour and attitude towards partisans.

Thus, identification of an individual with the aggressor is the mechanism of defence of weaker vis-a-vis the stronger and more powerful. This means of psychological self-defence is well demonstrated in life, it was widespread in concentration camps, where prisoners adapted behavior patterns of guards in order to fear them less and became provokers and informers.

There is one more effect of the negative identification, where identification with the aggressor eventually results in the understanding that it is impossible to defend the enemy and leads to the opposite solution, which is to unify and make an alliance. If the authority and power of two counterparts are more or less equal, none of them will ever accept a subordinate position and be willing to identify him with the other. After all, a lean peace is better than war. This fact demonstrates that the negative identification is able to influence and regulate certain social conflicts.

3) Ambivalent identification is usually and most frequently met in reality. This mixed type is related to the fact that one and the same person can give ambiguous feelings. He can be respected due to certain personal traits of character, one may want to take after him; on the other hand, his character can give a sense of fear, anxiety, etc. by emulating certain characteristics, an individual forms himself and his behaviour in the process of socialization.

Imitation is the behavioral expression of identification. If somebody likes another person’s behavior, this person, wittingly or unwillingly, starts acting in the same way or even attributing similar traits to himself and form a line of behavior on their basis. Excited people can be easily influenced. With somebody’s example caused by similar reasons, they adapt same behavior persuading themselves that they have same feelings and experiences.

Famous Soviet psychologist Vygotskiy L.S. emphasized that “in our analysis of psychology of a modern human being, we find so many other persons’ opinions, words, thoughts so that we cannot definitely draw a line between one person’s individuality and the social one” [1, p. 317]. It can be asserted that, on the one hand, identification being the mechanism of an individual’s defence, has a positive role, on the other hand, it has a negative role through evening the individual out and making it a part of an impersonal mechanical whole, lacking individuality and unique character. However, the personal “self” remains unchanged if there is a solid “core”, stable basis and strong foundation of a personality that form values formed in the process of socialization of the individual.

The system of values and its hierarchy demonstrate a social maturity level of each individual.

Identification with other people (or a group of people) is a powerful mechanism of a personality formation, whereas maintenance of the social identity is the most important factor of inner nature that helps a modern individual find his place in life and gain confidence in his abilities and the future. Here, it is especially important with who specifically the person identifies him, which “social network” is the most axiologically meaningful for him in the end of the day because in the long run this determines the individual’s activity focusing on certain moral values.

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Extract

The problem of social identification is becoming increasingly important as it is inextricably connected to the issue of integration and consolidation of the society. Identification with other persons (or a group of persons) is a powerful psychological mechanism of formation of the individuality, whereas preservation of the social identity is the most important factor of inner nature that helps a modern individual find his place in the society. A positive aspect here is that the understanding of unity and integrity is formed, the “we” feeling comes in, and there is comprehension of common group interests and objectives. The article contains brief analysis of the main general and theoretical aspects of the issue and gives brief characteristics of three types of the protective identification: positive, negative, and ambivalent. Identification is becoming a defence mechanism and allows an individual to adapt to complicated realities of the modern society. Today, the universal concept of social identification mechanism does not exist, yet. This is explained by a great number of approaches in understanding the essence of the social identification, which emphasizes interdisciplinarity of this phenomenon.